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Chapter 2

Cold Facts in Hot Crisis? An Essay on the Role of Emotion in Health Crisis Reporting

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Abstract

Relations between emotion and quality journalism have been historically contentious, as emotion is often associated with sensationalism. Yet, contemporary scholarly debates of the role of emotion in news journalism have moved beyond a dichotomy between emotional and quality journalism, and have provided contextualized discussions of emotion's role, specifically in the contexts of disaster reporting, and war reporting, allowing for a more nuanced evaluation of emotion as playing an important part in news coverage. The present essay adds to these debates. We situated the discussion of emotion's role in the context of health crisis reporting, where the critical view of emotion is particularly prevalent as journalists have recurrently been blamed for scare-mongering or emotionalizing. We argue that any appraisal of emotion in news is context-specific, and must particularly consider emotion's functions and effects for the performance of different journalistic roles. An interdisciplinary review of empirical findings from three academic spheres – journalism, (health) risk communication, and media psychology – demonstrates that emotion-evoking news elements can benefit the performance of journalistic roles and can thus – if inscribed pointed and moderately – fulfil important functions in health crisis reporting.

“[E]motional story-telling is a driving force behind award-winning journalism”, states the conclusion of a recent journalism study (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013, p. 141). The conclusion stems from a content analysis of 101 Pulitzer-Prize winning news articles in search for which journalistic styles are valorised as exemplary, high-quality journalism. It found that the awarded stories were “profoundly emotional”, characterized specifically by anecdotal leads, personalized story-telling and a pervasive appeal to emotion (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013, p. 137). The finding that emotional story-telling is celebrated as excellence appears at odds with widespread conceptions of emotion as “a marker of unprincipled and flawed journalism” (Peters, 2011, p. 297). Such a view surfaces commonly in the debate about news sensationalism (Grabe, Zhou, & Barnett, 2001; Kleemans & Hendriks Vettehen, 2009; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000).¹ Often “the sensational is perceived to involve emotion in such a way as to preclude rationality and hence serious quality journalism” (Wahl-Jorgensen, 2013, p. 131). Personal stories, graphic and vivid descriptions, and emotional expression – formal news features that characterized the Pulitzer-Prize winning articles – are also among the formal features that scholars propose to define sensationalist reporting (e.g., Grabe et al., 2001; Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, & Beentjes, 2005). Were we to follow these definitions, would we be obliged to consider the award-winning stories sensational?

The specific problem addressed here touches on an intricate general debate on the appropriate role of emotion in quality journalism (e.g., Davis & McLeod, 2003; Muñoz-Torres, 2012; Örnebring & Jönsson, 2004; Peters, 2011; Sparks & Tulloch, 2000). Sensational news continues to attract a wide audience for reasons that are not fully understood. We examined sensational front-page newspaper stories from eight countries, published between 1700 and 2001. The 736 stories that we collected were sorted thematically, and 12 categories emerged. An analysis of the frequency of stories within these categories demonstrates relative stability in their ranking over time and place, suggesting that the content of sensational news is not socially constructed. The categories that emerged correspond to major themes in evolutionary psychology (e.g., altruism, cheater detection, reputation, treatment of offspring). In recent years, such debates of the role of emotion in news journalism have moved beyond a dichotomy between emotional and quality journalism. It has been acknowledged that emotion does not

necessarily preclude quality coverage, nor does it automatically entail news sensationalism. Several scholars have provided contextualized discussions of emotion's role, specifically in the contexts of disaster reporting (Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen, & Cottle, 2012; Wahl-Jorgensen & Pantti, 2013), and war reporting (Tumber, 2013), allowing for a more nuanced evaluation of emotion as playing an important part in news coverage. In this essay, we situated the discussion of emotion's role in the context of health crisis reporting, because a nuanced and evidence-based debate of emotion's role in this context is currently still lacking, and more importantly, this normative debate seems particularly relevant in the context of *health crisis reporting*. Health crises exist if a potentially health-threatening event rapidly unfolds (e.g., a spreading virus in an epidemic), resulting in great uncertainty about the impact of this development. As health crises are in themselves inherently emotional, it matters greatly how much emotion journalists choose to add to the situation. The media "play a major role in setting the public sphere's emotional tone" (Richards & Rees, 2011, p. 584) and they can exert a powerful effect on the populace and their response to risk. A look at journalistic codes of conduct reveals that journalists consider contemplating on the impact of their work – including a careful handling of emotion in health risk reporting – as their responsibility. For example, the German Press Code states that journalists should avoid sensational reporting that could evoke unfounded fears or hopes when covering medical issues (Deutscher Presserat, 2015, p. 10). Nevertheless, during past health crises, the media was repeatedly and strongly criticized for sensationalizing the story (Glik, 2007), which demonstrates that the issue remains topical and comes to the fore in health crisis coverage.

In this essay, we discuss the role and use of emotion in the context of health crisis reporting with the goal of differentiating the normative debate. Starting from the premise that any discussion of emotion in news is context-specific, we situate our own discussion in the context of health crisis reporting. Our main argument is that the use of emotion in health crisis reporting must be evaluated in the light of different societal roles we may assign to journalists (and which may differ dependent on context). This is because emotion may be beneficial for the fulfilment of some of journalism's societal roles and detrimental to others. Accordingly, we argue that in order to evaluate the role of emotion we must understand why journalists

use emotion in their reporting and to what effect.

We bring together three academic spheres to illuminate this question in the context of health crisis reporting: Journalism, (health) risk communication, and media psychology. From journalism studies we derive the argument that journalism's societal position comes with a set of expectations about roles and responsibilities attached to that position, some of which journalists' integrate in their self-concept of their professional roles. In the present essay, we will discuss three exemplary journalistic roles, namely (1) writing interesting and attracting audience attention, (2) reporting objectively and accurately, and (3) mobilizing public engagement. We propose that emotion plays particular functions for the fulfilment of these roles when covering health crises and journalists use them to that effect. From risk communication and media psychology we derive empirical evidence about how emotion actually affects the performance of each of these three roles.

The Criticism of Emotion in Health Crisis Reporting

In the debate around the role and the use of emotions in journalism, emotion has recurrently been associated with sensationalism (Örnebring & Jönsson, 2004; Pantti, 2010). In the existing research on the phenomenon of news sensationalism, sensational news has been defined as news that emphasizes “emotion for emotion's sake” (Emery & Emery, 1978, cited in Grabe, Zhou, Lang, & Bolls, 2000, p. 582) that is “obviously structured to arouse emotions and empathy” (Graber, 1994, p. 486), or that “provoke[s] more sensory and emotional reactions than what society has deemed proper to desire or experience” (Grabe et al., 2001, p. 637). Empirical operationalizations of sensationalism propose that news is sensational if it contains particular content and/or formal features. For print reportage, it has been proposed that *intense* – i.e., *precise, concrete, vivid* – *language, emotional word choices or non-sober language* add to sensationalism (Burgers & de Graaf, 2013). *Pictures* accompanying news stories that portray either *emotions, laypeople or close-ups of human faces* (i.e., personalize), or *shots from the audiences' own country* (i.e., emphasize proximity) have been classified as sensational (Schaap & Pleijter,

2012). Scholars further propose to categorize news items as sensational if they include *verbalized emotion* (e.g., a victim or the journalists themselves expressing emotion), *concrete descriptions* (e.g., exemplary information, personal stories), or if they create *proximity* (either geographically by portraying domestic events and people, or psychologically through close-ups, concrete descriptions) (Hendriks Vettehen, Beentjes, Nuijten, & Peeters, 2010; Hendriks Vettehen et al., 2005). Overall, this research, here only reviewed briefly, indicates that emotion is an integral part of what is called sensational reporting, and as such often viewed as problematic.

Especially in the context of threats to health and safety, the concern about sensationalism seems to be driven by the fear that sensational news lead to inaccurate - most likely exaggerated - perceptions of risk (Grabe, Lang, & Zhao, 2003), or even unwarranted public fear (Glik, 2007). Sensationalism is a common criticism of news reporting in health crises. An illustrative case was the reporting on the H1N1 or Swine flu in 2009. Epidemiologists criticized the media for having created an artificial hype around the disease (Bonneux & Damme, 2010), and many among the public perceived the media as “fear mongering” (Wagner-Egger et al., 2011, p. 461). Journalists have also been scolded for playing on public fears by emotionalizing an event, for example, through spotlighting the plights of individual victims (Dunwoody & Peters, 1992, p. 203).

Having reviewed the criticisms, we are now faced with the question: What then is the appropriate role of emotion in health crisis reporting? We argue that the role of emotion in journalistic coverage is situational, as is its effects. What may be appropriate in one context may not be in the next, as what may have beneficial effects in one scenario may be detrimental in another. Particularly coverage of events of an emotional nature, such as a health crisis poses, provides a challenging situation in which questions concerning professional journalistic norms and ethics may easily arise. We may ask, for instance, whether detached, emotionally cold reporting would objectively mirror the reality of an emotion-laden, ‘hot’ crisis, or whether rather, accurate reporting must comprise emotions. For example, Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen and Cottle (2012, p. 64) argue that disaster reporting may be “one of the few legitimate places for emotional expression in news journalism”.

There is hence a need to discuss the role of emotion in situational

context rather than merely from a general perspective, and as the discussed criticisms illustrated, health crisis situations provide a particularly relevant and contested context to do so. While the role of emotion has been discussed in the specific contexts of disaster reporting (Pantti, Wahl-Jorgensen, & Cottle, 2012; Wahl-Jorgensen & Pantti, 2013), and war or conflict reporting (Tumber, 2013), health crisis coverage has received little scholarly attention despite its considerable societal relevance in the face of past and present pandemic threats.²

The Special Context of the Public Health Crisis

The last decades have seen a number of public health crises, such as the 2009/10 H1N1 pandemic, food safety crises like EHEC in 2011 and the recent Ebola outbreak in West Africa which caused a death toll of more than ten thousand people (World Health Organization [WHO], 2015). There are three reasons why such crises define a special context for the appraisal of emotion in reporting: First, as discussed, the emotional nature of health crises poses specific challenges for news journalism (Glik, 2007). Second, the media serve as key information platforms during health crises, and many among the public derive their judgment of risks largely on information from the media (Kitzinger & Reilly, 1997). Emotion has been found to play a decisive role in the formation of risk judgments (e.g., Finucane, 2013; Loewenstein, Hsee, Weber, & Welch, 2001), thus emotional coverage will impact public understanding of risk. Third, health crises are often characterized by a particular need for action. The prevention of disease spread in an epidemic scenario, as an example, is crucially dependent on individuals' adherence to recommendations of precautionary behaviours (hand hygiene, vaccination etc.), contact tracing and population screening (Brug et al., 2009). Emotion has been found to impact behavioural response to risk (e.g., Loewenstein et al., 2001). At times health crises evolve into humanitarian disasters, and then require further engagement by the public, beyond self-protection towards providing humanitarian aid to others. Emotions can also play a role in fostering such pro-social behaviours (Haidt, 2003; Schnall & Roper, 2012).

Consequently, health crisis reporting requires careful balancing of

emotion and facts, preventing panic but instilling the right amount of engagement, both cognitive and emotional. Yet the exact instrumentation of emotion for this purpose is far from obvious and in fact, disputed. Context-specific demands, such as outlined here for the case of a health crisis, impact the evaluation of emotional elements in news because they may impact the expectations the public holds about journalists' roles and responsibilities.

Journalistic Roles and Emotion in Health Crisis Journalism

Journalists' self-image of their societal function is demarcated by their perception of their professional roles (Donsbach, 2008). Role perceptions have been defined as, "generalized expectations which journalists believe exist in society and among different stakeholders, which they see as normatively acceptable, and which influence their behaviour on the job" (Donsbach, 2008, p. 2605). Roles refer thus to what journalists' perceptions of the responsibilities their work entails, and role performance is judged by the fulfilment of the expectations tied to their profession.

We argue that different journalistic roles might come to the fore in the context of a health crisis. Willnat, Weaver and Choi (2013, p. 173) find in a cross-country comparative survey "that journalists tend to put more emphasis on one role than on another, depending upon the institutional, cultural, and political situations in their own countries". We propose that they also alter the emphasis on certain roles based on situational factors, i.e., the situation or topic they are reporting on. Prior research found that journalists' perceive themselves as holding a variety of roles, many of these simultaneously (Willnat et al., 2013). In the present essay we focus on three exemplary roles: (1) writing interesting and attracting audience attention, (2) reporting objectively and accurately, and (3) mobilizing public engagement. We argue that emotion plays different functions in the performance of these roles – and that the normative evaluation of emotion in health crises journalism should take this into account. Moreover, we posit that emotional news elements that may be functional for the fulfilment of one role (e.g., attracting attention) may not be functional for another. Thus the usage of emotion is strongly tied to common role conflicts, as using emotion

for the performance of certain professional roles might unavoidably conflict the fulfilment of others.

For example, as outlined in further detail in the remainder of this chapter, an emotional tone and arousing pictures may be instrumental in providing interesting and attention-attracting coverage that helps putting a news item on the public agenda. The same emotional reporting may facilitate audience engagement and increase empathy towards disease victims. In specific situations of a health crisis these roles may be warranted. However, at the same time, this emotional reporting may conflict with accuracy goals, if the emotional intensity of the coverage seems exaggerated in light of the actual emotionality of the appraised event. As this simple example may show it seems relevant to scrutinize the role of emotion in fulfilling the three journalistic roles further to reach a differentiated view when it comes to its normative evaluation.

The Role of Emotion for Writing Interesting and Attracting Audience Attention

In their book “The Elements of Journalism” Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007, p. 6) identify the fundamental principles and practices of journalism and remark that journalists “must strive to make the significant interesting and relevant”. Writing articles in an interesting, attention-grabbing style is also an important criterion of journalistic quality. The Pulitzer Prize study mentioned in the introduction demonstrated this, as well as another study that interviewed judges in a journalism award program. This study found that excellent articles are distinguished by storytelling techniques that are vivid, compelling, capture audiences’ attention, and stimulate “engagement and emotional impact” (Shapiro, Albanese, & Doyle, 2006, p. 435). Many journalists endorse the task of writing interesting, attention-grabbing articles as one of their professional roles. A survey of 1800 journalists in 18 countries found that two ‘interest-arousing’ roles – providing audiences with the information that is most interesting, and concentrating on news that will attract the widest possible audience – are part of many journalists’ self-concept. However, this does not count for all journalists alike (Hanitzsch, 2011, p. 485). Regardless of whether journalists explicitly endorse writing interestingly and attracting audience attention as their role, journalistic work is embedded in a context of fierce competition over audience attention (Prior,

2003), which renders attention-attraction, if not a journalistic ideal, often still a professional necessity.

In the context of health crisis reporting, the topic itself is often enough to attract attention. Posing a potentially severe threat to self, health crises by nature involve both personal relevance and an element of drama. However, emotion-evoking elements may serve sustaining public interest once the novelty of the risk has worn off, and public interests wanes, if on-going infections are still threatening public health. It is also conceivable, that not every health crisis is considered important when it is still in the early stages. Yet, due to their often exponential spread health crises need fast and immediate responses to prevent escalation (Lewnard et al., 2016). If risks concerns local news audiences preventive actions may be required, if risks are distant, they might call for humanitarian aid. An example of the latter is the recent Ebola case, in which the response of the global community was criticized as too slow, and where it seemed also public awareness was low, because individual donations were low, compared to other disasters (NOS, 2014; Mameli, 2016).

What is emotion's function and effect in fulfilling the role of writing interesting, attention-attracting articles? Media psychological studies suggest that emotion can be a powerful instrument for making news, even about dull or less interesting topics, appealing to audiences. *Emotion-laden pictures* have been found to stimulate curiosity about the depicted threat and in turn motivate both the selection of news articles and more extensive, in-depth reading of these (Knobloch, Hastall, Zillmann, & Callison, 2003). In the context of health risks, particularly *emotion-arousing exemplars* have been found to get disproportional attention, and thus “draw attention to pressing safety and health issues” (Zillmann, 2006, p. 232). In addition, audiences allocate more cognitive resources to message processing if news are emotion-arousing (Grabe et al., 2000), particularly if arousing negative emotions (Lang, Newhagen, & Reeves, 1996), which can result in better memorizing of news content. This seems to support the proposition voiced by some scholars that emotional reporting may help to keep citizens – particularly those who would otherwise not consume news at all – informed (Baum, 2003; Hartley, 2009, p. 316), a fact sensationalism scholars equally recognize (Kleemans & Hendriks Vettehen, 2009). As Cottle (1998, p. 8) remarks, “notwithstanding their commercial pursuit of ratings, readers and

revenue and consequent parading of spectacle, drama and entertainment”, the media can serve to focus attention on relevant societal risks. In fact, emotion may be instrumental in achieving Kovach and Rosenstiel’s earlier stated proposition “to make the significant interesting”, in cases where public awareness of health crisis events is lacking. For example, the image of the dead Syrian refugee boy Aylan Kurdi, washed ashore the coast of Turkey, became a powerful, iconic image of the global refugee crisis that instigated public debate.

However, journalists need to find the right level of emotionality in their reporting to achieve optimal effects on users’ attention and involvement. Firstly, if news evokes too much (emotional) arousal, beneficial effects of emotion on news processing can reverse due to a processing overload. Grabe et al. (2003) found that while news containing arousing features (music, sound effects) enhance the memory of stories about calm or sober news subjects, the same arousing production features may impair the memory of inherently arousing news subjects (such as health crises often are). Secondly, Hendriks Vettehen, Nuijten, and Peeters (2008) found while audiences generally prefer emotion-arousing over sober news, they do so only up to a certain intensity level.³ Thirdly, emotional content can also distract attention by directing it only to certain parts of a news story - namely the emotional part - and thus resulting in a neglect of other parts of the content, which may lead to recall errors, and distorted issue perception (Zillmann & Brosius, 2000). Considering that health crises situations are inherently emotional, emotion-evoking elements must therefore be employed carefully, ideally tailored to crisis characteristics (e.g., the severity of the risk, disease proximity for audiences) .

In summary, we find evidence that emotional elements fulfil important functions for the role of producing interesting, attention-attracting news. Emotional news is interesting and engaging, thus accomplishing the commercial necessities as well as potentially directing the public’s attention to essential information such as on an emerging health threat. However, since health crises are inherently emotional and research found that overly emotional news cause adverse effects, journalists inscribe emotion with great care. The performance of the interest- and attention-attracting role may cause adverse effects for public health, such as impairing the memory of, or distracting from, essential information if journalists use too much

emotion or use it for emphasizing irrelevant aspects.

The Role of Emotion in Reporting Objectively and Accurately

Although disputed among journalism scholars regarding its possibility, desirability, and present realization in journalism (Skovsgaard, Albaek, Bro, & de Vreese, 2013), objectivity remains a key notion in journalists' self-concepts. Definitions of objectivity are manifold. However, in summary, the concept has been viewed to comprise the following aspects: accurate and non-distorted, impartial, fair, balanced, value-free, opinion-free, and neutral reporting (Deuze, 2005; Donsbach & Klett, 1993; McNair, 1998; Schudson, 2001). The objectivity norm is commonly connected to the "disseminator" role (Weaver & Wilhoit, 1996, p. 137), or "passive mirror role" (Skovsgaard et al., 2013, p. 27); journalists adopting these roles emphasize sticking to 'hard facts' and refraining from value judgments or subjectivity.

The notion of objective reporting periodically raises its head in discussions on journalistic roles and norms, particularly in the context of emotion in news. Journalists often still prescribe to the ideal of objectivity, which according to some scholars, as Richards and Rees (2011, p. 854) note, "precludes excursions into the emotional". Some have proposed that objective reporting is by definition unemotional in tone (Schudson, 2001), or emotionally detached (DeFleur & Dennis, 1991). Emotion is often viewed critically, as a violation of the "normative ideals of journalistic objectivity and impartiality" (Pantti et al., 2012, p. 64).

But does emotion-evoking coverage of a health crisis preclude objective and accurate reporting? To answer this, we need to consider the epistemological underpinnings of the notion of objectivity. The ideal of objectivity stems from the realist assumption that the world can be accurately and neutrally observed and described as it is (Muñoz-Torres, 2012). If we aim to determine whether emotion precludes objectivity we must examine whether sober, unemotional reporting on a health crisis situation is an accurate, non-distorted description of reality. The question is two-fold: first whether the journalistic product, i.e., the individual news item, accurately portrays reality, and second whether this portrayal of risk allows accurate *interpretation* of that reality (e.g., personal health risk) by the audience.

Is an emotionless portrayal of an emotional reality accurate and non-distorted? As discussed earlier, health crises are by nature emotion-laden. If

human suffering, as in the recent case of the Ebola outbreak experienced by literally thousands of people, is part of reality, we might argue that any ‘mirroring’ of this reality should naturally contain emotions. Journalists feel that emotion has a certain value in portraying truth, at times also poses ‘facts’ and is a means for showing reality (Pantti, 2010). Accordingly, we propose that emotionless reporting on an emotion-laden health crisis does not always accurately reflect reality.

The second aspect, whether the journalistic product allows accurate *interpretation*, relates to the effects of emotional health risk reporting on accurate understanding of risk. Risk (communication) scholars have researched the role of emotion in risk judgments extensively. Traditionally disregarded as an interference signal that disturbs and distorts rational judgment, emotion was re-evaluated in recent decades with mounting evidence of the importance of emotion for proper understanding of risk (e.g., see also “affect heuristic”, Finucane, Alhakami, Slovic, & Johnson, 2000; “risk as feeling”, Loewenstein et al., 2001). Seminal was a series of experiments by a group of neuroscientists centred on Damasio (Bechara, Damasio, Damasio, & Anderson, 1994; Damasio, 1994), who discovered that emotions – rather than being detrimental – are an integral and indispensable part of accurate and efficient decision-making.⁴ Since then, a considerable amount of research has been conducted. Reviewing this in its completeness goes beyond the scope of this article (for reviews see: Finucane, 2013; Pham, 2007; Visschers et al., 2012), rather we present a selection of studies. An important journalistic choice concerns how to portray risks: through sober risk statistics, or emotive elements such as personal accounts or pictures, or combinations of these. We thus selected studies that illustrate how different portrayals of risks impact accurate understanding of risk.

As ‘hard facts’, statistics are an important element of objective, factual reporting. Risk statistics may however not necessarily induce accurate understanding of risk. For example, individuals become increasingly numb to statistical casualties as the magnitude gets more catastrophic, an effect called “psychophysical numbing” (Fetherstonhaugh, Slovic, Johnson, & Friedrich, 1997). If health crisis coverage relies merely on statistical facts, this might lead to the paradoxical effect that the higher infection or fatality rates, the more the public may become numb to the risk and underestimate it.

Further, even statistics are not as factual, or cold, as commonly as-

sumed. Consider the following experiment by Slovic, Monahan, & MacGregor (2000): Forensic psychologists and psychiatrists were asked to judge the risk that a certain mental patient 'Mr Jones' would relapse after being discharged from the psychiatric ward. Were they told that '20 out of 100 patients' (relative frequency) were estimated to relapse, they judged his risk substantially higher, than if they were told it was '20% of patients' (probability). Why? The authors suggest the reason is that individuals – even trained professionals – attach different emotional values to the different numbers. The statement '20 out of 100' evokes stronger images ('some guy going crazy and killing someone'), while the percentage is comparatively affect-free (Slovic, Finucane, Peters, & MacGregor, 2007). The same phenomenon was observed for health risks. Individuals judged a disease that kills 1,286 out of every 10,000 people as more severe than a disease that kills 24.14% of the population (Yamagishi, 1997). These findings illustrate firstly, that seemingly factual, objective numbers do not necessarily lead to identical risk judgments, and secondly, that updates on infection and fatality rates, a central element of health crisis coverage, are not affect-free but may evoke emotions in surprising ways.

Risk (communication) research further indicates that emotion-evoking *personal stories* or *risk narratives* can pose important tools for enabling understanding of risk. Research has flourished under different terminology, most prominently *exemplars* and *narratives*, yet findings are comparable. *Narratives*, that is, concrete, emotionally interesting, and vivid personal stories (e.g., of someone affected by a disease), were found to be more powerful and effective for promoting self-protective health behaviours than statistical evidence (Zebregs, van den Putte, Neijens, & de Graaf, 2014). For example, in the context of hepatitis B virus (HBV), De Wit, Das, and Vet (2008) demonstrated that narrative evidence is superior to statistics for promoting a sense of personal risk to HBV and vaccination intentions. In media psychology, substantial evidence stems from research surrounding "exemplification theory" (Zillmann, 1999). Overall it supports the notion that personal stories – or exemplars – in news lead to higher risk perceptions. If news includes both personal accounts and factual risk statistics, personal accounts generally overrule the impact of statistics. Emotion-conveying exemplars have a particularly strong and lasting impact on risk perceptions (Aust & Zillmann, 1996). If exemplars are distorted, extreme

or portray only worst-case scenarios, they can lead to gross overestimation of risk and induce fear. Representative exemplars though, – especially emotional ones – can effectively install appropriate perceptions of personal risk (Zillmann, 2006).

Risk (communication) research further supports the effectiveness of *emotion-evoking pictures* for understanding risks. In one study, participants asked to judge the risk of flooding, perceived its consequences as more severe, when they saw images of flooded houses (Keller, Siegrist, & Gutscher, 2006). Similarly, individuals reading stories that contained pictures of breast cancer patients perceived their own vulnerability to breast cancer higher and were in turn more motivated to adopt recommended precautionary measures (Hong, Lee, & Yu, 2010). Media-psychological experiments confirm this: Individuals that watched a newscast with explicit pictures perceived their personal risk of skin cancer higher than those viewing a newscast containing sanitized imagery. The inclusion of one emotional exemplar in a strongly fact-focused news item can increase risk perceptions and promote willingness for self-protective actions (Visschers et al., 2012; Zillmann & Gan, 1996). Similar findings were reported for others risks and video footage (Gibson & Zillmann, 2000; Xie, Wang, Zhang, & Yu, 2011).

Evaluating the finding that emotional health crisis coverage increases risk perceptions is ambiguous; it could be interpreted as prompting an *overestimation* of risk or as correcting for an *underestimation* of risk. To illustrate, if audiences judged their risk of a virus infection accurately based on factual risk information, emotional reporting would lead to an overestimation, as it increases risk perception. If however, audiences underestimate their personal risk compared to the actual risk based on only ‘cold facts’, emotional coverage would correct for this misjudgement. Sensationalism scholars generally interpret the finding that emotional coverage increases risk as ‘exaggerating’ risk (e.g., Grabe et al., 2003). Risk and health communication scholars, on the contrary, often perceive emotions as enabling accurate understanding of risk. Slovic et al. (2004, p. 321), for example, state:

“We cannot assume that an intelligent person can understand the meaning of and properly act upon even the simplest of numbers such as amounts of money or number of lives at risk, not to mention more esoteric measures or statistics pertaining to risk, unless these numbers

are infused with affect.”

In summary, in the context of health crises, emotions can be functional if not necessary for accurate, objective reporting. They are part of an accurate reflection of the inherently emotional reality of health crises situations, and as risk research demonstrates, they can be essential for the public’s accurate understanding of health risk. News reports including only risk statistics, while seemingly factual and objective, carry emotional value and can at times trigger inaccurate interpretations of risk.

The Role of Emotion in Mobilizing Public Engagement

The 18th century philosopher David Hume remarked: “Reason, being cool and disengaged, is no motive to action” (cited in Penelhum, 1992, p. 130). A number of journalism scholars and journalists argue against cold and detached, in favour of more emotionally engaging reporting. The objectivity norm has been criticized as “undesirable when it leads to detached and disinterested journalists who take no moral stand to improve the society they are supposed to serve.” (Skovsgaard et al., 2013, p. 24-25). When reporting in times of crisis, “[t]he idea that journalists must be detached and neutral in the middle of chaos is outdated and wrong”, Ward (2010) observes. Rather, some suggest, journalism’s public service function requires that the ideals of objectivity and detachment be replaced with a sense of responsibility for improving society and engaging citizens in societal issues (Skovsgaard et al., 2013). Similarly, Pantti (2011, p. 222) argues that the “[e]motional engagement, which news media can encourage or discourage” lays a foundation for public debate as well as civil and moral action.

How does emotion help or hinder engaging the audience in a health crisis? Some scholars highlighted that emotions can engage audiences with global or distant issues. It has been proposed that emotion in disaster news facilitates an involvement with victims and brings about “a sense of care and responsibility for the distant sufferer” (Chouliaraki, 2006, p. 1). Chouliaraki (2008) posits that mediated representations of distant suffering are a prerequisite for enabling public action such as donating or volunteering, contingent on the extent of emotional involvement the media report elicits in the audience. This finding is likewise applicable to health crisis coverage, as health crises can both evolve into a humanitarian disaster as in the Ebola

case, and can co-occur with or occur in the aftermath of disasters (e.g., the Cholera outbreak after the Haiti earthquake) (Bolton & Burkle, 2013).

Often news reporting of global (health) crises upholds separations between local audiences and distant suffering though. Joye's (2010) analysis of the media coverage of the SARS epidemic found that news commonly sustained a distinction between 'us' and 'them', i.e., local audiences and distant victims, thus conveying an image of a world divided in zones of threat and safety. Epidemics, rather than more localized risks such as disasters and many political conflicts, are global issues as the risk can travel and can do so at high speed. As such, health crises often require acting as global communities, including political support, donations, or volunteering. Crisis coverage that engages audiences around the globe may help achieving this goal, and might also signal to politicians and health authorities to act (if response is slow, as in the earlier discussed Ebola case).

What do we know about the functions and psychological effects of emotion for engaging people? Emotion is, by its very nature, closely related to behaviour. Following Frijda, Kuipers, & ter Schure (1989) causing a change in 'action readiness' is the defining function of emotion. From action readiness follows a prioritizing of certain behavioural responses over alternatives due to which emotion has the power to commit people to perform certain behaviours despite barrier, efforts or other costs (Frijda, 2004). Risk researchers have described this as commitment function: Emotional involvement engenders long-term commitment to the implementation of decisions even if they conflict with (short-term) self-interests, thus enabling us to put the interest of others above our own (Finucane, 2013). During the 2014 Ebola outbreak, for example, Dutch NGOs lamented the low donations for Ebola relief efforts (only 780,000 EUR) compared to other recent disaster situation (e.g., 36,000,000 EUR for disaster recovery in the Philippines; NOS, 2014). In such contexts, personal accounts or photographs of victims may bring the human element back into mortality statistics, encourage social involvement and stimulate pro-social attitudes and actions. The findings from the earlier quoted studies from the field of (health) risk communication (e.g., De Wit et al., 2008; Hong et al., 2010; Zebregs et al., 2014) further found that emotion-evoking news elements (narratives, imagery) can likewise stimulate self-protective health behaviours, such as hand-washing or vaccination, which are crucial determinants for the pre-

vention of disease spread and crises escalation (Brug et al., 2009).

In summary, if journalists adopt the role of mobilizing public engagement, emotions can play important functions. In health crisis coverage, research indicates that emotion-evoking news elements can foster involvement and in turn pro-social behaviours for (distant) others, as well as promote adherence to preventive measures.

Discussion: Emotion in Health Crisis Reporting and Beyond

Understanding and evaluating emotion's place in journalism is a tough undertaking. In the past, health crisis coverage has been repeatedly criticized for being too emotional, dramatic, or sensationalist. This paper set out to differentiate the normative debate on the role of emotion in the context of health crisis reporting. We argued that the evaluation of emotion in news is contingent on context, and discussed it in the case of the health crisis. Situational context partially determines the importance of different journalistic roles; it influences the expectations of various societal stakeholders towards journalism, and in turn journalists' self-perceptions of their responsibilities. For example, in the context of health crises, health authorities expectations that journalists motivate the public to engage in precautionary measures might result in journalists adopting the role of mobilizing public engagement. We argue that the usage of emotion in health crisis reporting needs to be evaluated in the light of these diverse roles, specifically considering why journalists use emotion and to what effect. Based on a review of empirical evidence for the utility and effects of emotion within the bounds of three journalistic roles we find that emotion-evoking elements can be functional, if not essential, for writing captivatingly and attracting the public's attention to an emerging risk and to vital information, enabling accurate understanding of (personal) risk, and mobilizing public engagement for crisis relief efforts.

While the present approach focused on health crisis reporting, emotion may fulfil similar beneficial functions in reporting on other crisis contexts, as has been discussed for example in the context of disaster coverage (see Pantti, 2011). Also for particular genres such as development journal-

ism, advocacy journalism or environmental journalism, emotion may fulfil particular functions. Our core argument for the normative debate on emotion is therefore that any appraisal of emotion should consider the roles (and with that the societal expectations) journalists aspire to fulfil in specific contexts, and reflect on the functionality of emotion for role performance rather than making generalized appraisals.

A note of caution is warranted. We do not intend to present emotion as a panacea for good (health crisis) reporting. As discussed earlier, emotional coverage can cause harmful communicative side effects, especially if overly emotional. Further, we do not want to dismiss the fact that some journalists do use emotion for questionable purposes – exaggerating, sensationalizing or letting commercial imperatives dominate their reporting. Our intention is solely to contribute to a differentiated debate, by considering the motifs of emotional usage as well as its effects. Our rationale is that, as demonstrated, a reflective and careful inscription of emotion can benefit the performance of journalism's societal roles, and we hence deem it valuable to invest (scientific) effort into understanding the functionality of emotions in news rather than denouncing them altogether.

Are Emotional Elements in Health Crisis News Sensational?

That news is sensationalist is a negative normative judgment. Sensationalist reporting is defined by *too much* emotion. Yet regrettably, the challenging normative issue of when emotion is 'too much' has hardly been addressed. This essay cannot completely remedy this lack but still offers a contribution to the debate. A primary step for determining appropriateness of emotion is identifying a suitable benchmark for evaluation. The question is: what eventual purpose do we expect emotion to be functional or appropriate for, as the purpose determines the use of emotion? Common charges against the media (also from the side of sensationalism scholars) often appear to be grounded in the objectivity norm, which may be violated by emotional reporting. The present essay, however, demonstrated two things: Firstly, the role of emotion in fulfilling the objectivity-benchmark may be more complex than often assumed. Objective, accurate reporting of health risks involves more than a sober or factual representation of reality in a news item. It entails that the news item also enables audiences to reach an interpretation of reality as it truly is. As shown, this can lead to different usage

of emotion in news. Secondly, objectivity may not be the only benchmark. Objective reporting is merely one among other journalistic roles in health crisis reporting. At least two other roles exist that may be of no lesser importance, depending on specific circumstances.

The answer to the question of which societal roles journalists should exactly fulfil, also determines the normative evaluation of emotional reporting. This is illustrated by the following: One of the earlier quoted definitions by Graber (1994, p. 486) states that sensational news is “obviously structured to arouse emotions and empathy”, a definition that makes empathy appear as undesirable. In contrast, the discussed literature on media witnessing of distant suffering emphasizes emotional involvement and empathy as important components for audience engagement. The discrepancy between the different appraisals of emotion seems to originate, at least partially, from different underlying perceptions of the roles journalists should primarily fulfil, like the role of a detached and objective reporter vs. an engaged reporter.

In the present essay, we discussed three journalistic roles and demonstrated emotion’s functionality in their performance. Functionality alone, however, does not automatically equal a positive normative appraisal of emotion. As the example of disagreeing evaluations of empathy-inducing coverage shows, functionality of emotional reporting for journalistic role performance only becomes a normative issue because the roles they help to fulfil are the objects of a normative debate. Normative judgments about emotional reporting depend on the appraisal of journalists’ societal roles, which may, again, differ across contexts. Accordingly, emotion-inducing elements in news coverage should be positively appraised if they are functional to a journalistic role that is normatively desired (in a given context). But they should be more critically evaluated if they are either dysfunctional for a desirable journalistic role or functional for an undesirable journalistic role.

In summary, we argue that emotion must neither necessarily preclude rationality or quality journalism, nor be sensational. Rather, so we hope to demonstrate with this essay, discussing emotion in the light of journalistic roles could help developing benchmarks, clarifying to what specific end emotion should be used appropriately. Empirical evidence from risk perception, health communication and media psychology on the different effects of emotions on attention, perceptions of ‘the truth’, and engagement

can help achieve this goal.

Conclusion

This essay set out to discuss the role and use of emotion in health crisis reporting, seeking to differentiate the normative debate of emotion in news by considering context and specific journalistic roles. Empirical evidence demonstrated that emotion-evoking elements could at times benefit the fulfilment of journalistic roles and can thus – if applied purposive and moderately – fulfil important functions in health crisis reporting. Hence, we conclusively propose that the evaluation of emotion for journalistic quality is context-dependent, must consider different roles journalists may adopt in specific contexts, and must reflect on the functionality of emotion for role performance rather than making generalized appraisals. Accepting emotion as an essential part of attention-grabbing reporting, accurate risk perception, and incitation to action in health crises, allows us to focus on what is most important: examining how the emotive and the informative can be most effectively combined in mediated representations of risk, and how emotional coverage may shape the public's response to a health crisis.

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Notes

¹ It likewise emerges in the related debates about tabloidization (e.g., Connell, 1998), and soft news (e.g., Reinemann, Stanyer, Scherr, & Legnante, 2011).

² In the case of war or conflict reporting the debate centres more on the relation of objectivity to dispassionate, detached reporting and on emotions of the journalist himself/herself (e.g., traumatic experiences).

³ Due to their interest in sensationalism rather than the specific emotion,

these studies did not distinguish emotional content from other sensational features (e.g., sound effects, dramatic editing). However, since sensationalism is defined as ‘emotion-arousing’, findings support the attention-attracting potential of emotion.

⁴ Although Damasio’s studies received criticism (see Slovic et al., 2004; for alternative interpretations of original findings see Maia & McClelland, 2004; Fellows and Farah 2005), the research was ground-breaking in providing empirical evidence for the necessity of emotion for risk judgment.

